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An Annual Review of General and Applied Psychology

SCIENCE AND POETRY

by

I. A. RICHARDS

*Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge.
Author of "Principles of Literary Criticism,"
"Practical Criticism," "Coleridge on Imagination,"
"Basic in Teaching, East and West," etc.*

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The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy 'of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact ; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything.—

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

SCIENCE AND POETRY

I.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In the hour of the Blue Bird and the Bristol Bomber, his thoughts are appropriate to the years of the Penny Farthing

W. H. AUDEN, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*.

MAN's prospects are not at present so rosy that he can neglect any means of improving them. He has recently made a number of changes in his customs and ways of life, partly with intention, partly by accident. These changes are involving such widespread further changes that the fairly near future is likely to see an almost complete reorganization of our lives, in their intimate aspects as much as in their public. Man himself is changing, together with his circumstances; he has changed in the past, it is true, but never perhaps so swiftly. His circumstances are not known to have ever changed so much or so suddenly before, with psychological as well as with economic, social and political dangers. This suddenness threatens us. Some parts of human nature resist change more than others. We risk disaster if

some of our customs change while others which should change with them stay as they are.

‘Habits that have endured for many thousands of years are not easy to throw off—least of all when they are habits of thought, and when they do not come into open conflict with changing circumstances, or do not clearly involve us in loss or inconvenience.’ Yet the loss may be great without our knowing anything about it. Before 1590 no one knew how inconvenient were our natural habits of thought about the ways in which a stone may fall; yet the modern world began when Galileo discovered what really happens. Only persons thought to be crazy knew before 1800 that ordinary traditional ideas as to cleanliness are dangerously inadequate. The infant’s average ‘expectation of life’ has increased by about 30 years since Lister upset them. Nobody before Sir Ronald Ross knew what were the consequences of thinking about malaria in terms of influences and miasmas instead of in terms of mosquitoes. The Roman Empire might perhaps have still been flourishing if someone had found this out before A.D. 100.

With such examples all about us we can no longer, in any department of life, so easily accept what was good enough for our fathers as good enough for ourselves, or for our children. We are forced to wonder whether our ideas, even upon subjects apparently of little importance, such as poetry, may not be missing the main point.⁶ It becomes indeed somewhat alarming to recognize, as we must, that our habits of thought remain, as regards most of our affairs, much as they were 5,000 years ago. The Sciences are, of course, simply the exceptions to this rule. Outside the Sciences—and the greater part of our thinking still goes on outside the Sciences—we think very much as our ancestors thought a hundred or two hundred generations ago. Certainly this is so as regards official views about poetry.¹ Is it not possible that these are wrong, as wrong as most ideas of an equally hoary antiquity? Is it not possible that to the men of the future our life to-day will seem a continual, ceaseless disaster due only to our own stupidity, to the nervelessness with which we accept and transmit ideas which do not and never have applied to anything?

The average educated man is growing more conscious, an extraordinarily significant change. It is probably due to the fact that his life is becoming more complex, more intricate, his desires and needs more varied and more apt to conflict. 'And as he becomes more conscious he can no longer be content to drift in unreflecting obedience to custom. He is forced to reflect.' And if reflection often takes the form of inconclusive worrying, that is no more than might be expected in view of the unparalleled difficulty of the task. To live reasonably is much more difficult today than it was in Dr. Johnson's time, and even then, as Boswell shows, it was difficult enough.

'To live reasonably is not to live by reason alone—the mistake is easy, and, if carried far, disastrous—but to live in a way of which reason, a clear, full sense of the whole situation, would approve. And the most important part of the whole situation, as always, is ourselves, our constitution as systems responsive to that in which we live.' The more we learn about the physical world, about our bodies, for example, the more points we find at which our ordinary behaviour is

out of accord with the facts, inapplicable, wasteful, disadvantageous, dangerous or absurd. Witness our habit of boiling our vegetables. We have still to learn how to feed ourselves satisfactorily.

‘Similarly, the little that is yet known about the mind already shows that our ways of thinking and feeling about very many of the things with which we concern ourselves are out of accord with the facts. This is pre-eminently true of our ways of thinking and feeling about poetry.’ We think and talk in terms which merge and confound orders which must be distinguished. We attribute to ourselves and to things, powers which neither we nor they possess. And equally we overlook or misuse powers which are all important to us.

‘Day by day, in recent years, man is getting more out of place in Nature—in the Nature which his ancient habits of thought formed for him. Where he is going to he does not yet know, he has not yet decided. As a consequence he finds life more and more bewildering, more and more difficult to live coherently. Thus he turns to consider himself, his own’

nature. For the first step towards a reasonable way of life is a better understanding of human nature.⁹

It has long been recognized that if only something could be done in psychology remotely comparable to what has been achieved in physics, practical consequences might be expected even more remarkable than any that the engineer can contrive. The first positive steps in the science of the mind have been slow in coming, but already they are beginning to change man's whole outlook.

II.

THE POETIC EXPERIENCE

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole ?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance ?

W. B. YEATS, *The Tower*.

Extraordinary claims have often been made for poetry—Matthew Arnold's words quoted at the head of this essay are an example — claims which very many people are inclined to view with astonishment or with the smile which tolerance gives to the enthusiast.⁶ Indeed, a more representative modern view would be that the future of poetry is *nil*.⁷ Peacock's conclusion in his *The Four Ages of Poetry* finds a more general acceptance. ⁸ "A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past . . . In whatever degree poetry is cultivated, it must necessarily be to the neglect of some branch of useful study : and it is a lamentable thing to see minds, capable of better things, running to seed in the spacious indolence of these empty, aimless mockeries of intellectual exertion."¹

Poetry was the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society: but for the maturity of mind to make a serious business of the playthings of its childhood, is as absurd as for a grown man to rub his gums with coral, and cry to be charmed asleep by the jingle of silver bells."⁹ And with more regret many others—Keats was among them—have thought that the inevitable effect of the advance of science would be to destroy the possibility of poetry.

What is the truth in this matter? How is our estimate of poetry going to be affected by science? And how will poetry itself be influenced? The extreme importance which has in the past been assigned to poetry is a fact which must be accounted for whether we conclude that it was rightly assigned or not, and whether we consider that poetry will continue to be held in such esteem or not. It indicates that the case for poetry, whether right or wrong, is one which turns on momentous issues. We shall not have dealt adequately with it unless we have raised questions of great significance.

‘Very much toil has gone to the endeavour to explain the high place of poetry in human affairs, with, on the whole, few satisfactory or convincing results.’ This is not surprising. ‘For in order to show how poetry is important it is first necessary to discover to some extent what it is.’ Until recently this preliminary task could only be very incompletely carried out; the psychology of instinct and emotion was too little advanced; and, moreover, the over-simple assumptions natural in pre-scientific enquiry definitely stood in the way. Neither the professional psychologist, whose interest in poetry is frequently not intense, nor the man of letters, who as a rule has no adequate ideas of the mind as a whole, has been equipped for the investigation. ‘Both a passionate knowledge of poetry and a capacity for dispassionate psychological analysis are required if it is to be satisfactorily prosecuted.’ ^a ‘It will be best to begin by asking ‘What *kind of a thing*, in the widest sense, is poetry?’ When we have answered this we shall be ready to ask ‘How can we use and misuse it?’ and ‘What reasons are there for thinking it valuable?’’

Let us take an experience, ten minutes of a person's life, and describe it in broad outline. It is now possible to indicate its general structure, to point out what is important in it, what trivial and accessory, which features depend upon which, how it has arisen, and how it is probably going to influence his future experience. There are, of course, wide gaps in this description, none the less it is at last possible to understand in general how the mind works in an experience, and what sort of stream of events the experience is.

A poem, let us say Wordsworth's *Westminster Bridge* sonnet, is such an experience, it is the experience the right kind of reader has when he peruses the verses. And the first step to an understanding of the place and future of poetry in human affairs is to see what the general structure of such an experience is. Let us begin by reading it very slowly, preferably aloud, giving every syllable time to make its full effect upon us. And let us read it experimentally, repeating it, varying our tone of voice until we are satisfied that we have caught its rhythm as well as we are able, and—whether our reading is such as

to please other people or not—that we ourselves at least are certain how it should ‘go.’

Earth has not anything to show more fair :
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty :
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning : silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky,
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour valley, rock or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep !
The river glideth at its own sweet will :
Dear God ! the very houses seem asleep
And all that mighty heart is lying still !

We may best make our analysis of the experience that arises through reading these lines, from the surface inwards, to speak metaphorically. The surface is the impression of the printed words on the retina. This sets up an agitation which we must follow as it goes deeper and deeper.

‘ The first things to occur (if they do not, the rest of the experience will be gravely inadequate) are the sound of the words ‘in the mind’s ear’ and the feel of the words imaginarily spoken. These together give the *full body*, as it were, to the words, and it is with the full bodies of words that the poet works, not with their

printed signs. The full bodies reflect the whole meaning of the words as the printed signs cannot.' But many people lose nearly everything in poetry through failure to develop this indispensable and controlling reflection.

'Next arise various pictures 'in the mind's eye'; not of words but of things for which the words stand; perhaps of ships, perhaps of hills; and together with them, it may be, other images of various sorts. Images of what it feels like to stand leaning on the parapet of Westminster Bridge. Perhaps that odd thing, an image of 'silence.' But, unlike the image-bodies of the words themselves, those other images of things are not vitally important. Those who have them may very well think them indispensable, and *for them* they may be necessary; but other people may not require them at all. This is a point at which differences between individual minds are very marked.

Thence onwards the agitation which is the experience divides into a major and a minor branch, though the two streams have innumerable interconnections and influence one another intimately.

Indeed, it is only as an expositor's artifice that we may speak of them as two streams.

‘The minor branch we may call the intellectual stream; the other, which we may call the active, or emotional, stream, is made up of the play of our interests.’

The intellectual stream is comparatively easy to follow; it follows itself, so to speak; but it is the less important of the two. In poetry it matters only *as a means*; it directs and excites the active stream. It is made up of thoughts, which are not static little entities that bob up into consciousness and down again out of it, but fluent happenings, events, which refer or point to the things the thoughts are ‘of.’

‘This pointing to things is all that thoughts do. They appear to do much more—to copy or to create—which are our chief illusions. The realm of pure thought is not an autonomous state. Our thoughts are the servants of our interests, and even when they seem to rebel it is some among our interests which are in insurrection. Our thoughts are pointers and it is the other, the active, stream which deals with the things which thoughts point to.’

Some people who read verse (they do not often read much of it), are so constituted that very little more happens than this intellectual stream of thoughts. It is perhaps superfluous to point out that they miss the real poem. To exaggerate this part of the experience, and give it too much importance on its own account, is a notable current tendency, and for many people explains why they do not read poetry.

‘The active branch is what really matters; for from it all the energy of the whole agitation comes. The thinking which goes on is somewhat like the play of an ingenious and invaluable ‘governor’ run by but controlling the main machine. Every experience is essentially some interest or group of interests swinging back to rest.

To understand what an interest is we should picture the mind as a system of very delicately poised balances, a system which so long as we are in health is constantly *growing*. Every situation we come into disturbs some of these balances to some degree. The ways in which they swing back to a new equipoise are the impulses with which we respond to the situation. And the chief balances in the system are our chief interests.

Suppose that we carry a magnetic compass about in the neighbourhood of powerful magnets. The needle waggles as we move and comes to rest pointing in a new direction whenever we stand still in a new position. Suppose that instead of a single compass we carry an arrangement of many magnetic needles, large and small, swung so that they influence one another, some able only to swing horizontally, others vertically, others hung freely. As we move, the perturbations in this system will be very complicated. But for every position in which we place it there will be a final position of rest for all the needles into which they will in the end settle down, a general poise for the whole system. But even a slight displacement may set the whole assemblage of needles busily readjusting themselves.

One further complication. Suppose that while all the needles influence one another, some of them respond only to some of the outer magnets among which the system is moving. The reader can easily draw a diagram if his imagination needs a visual support.

The mind is not unlike such a system if we imagine it to be incredibly complex.

‘ The needles are our interests, varying in their *importance*—that is in the degree to which any movement they make involves movement in the other needles. Each new disequilibrium, which a shift of position, a fresh situation, entails, corresponds to a need ; and the waggings which ensue as the system rearranges itself are our responses, the impulses through which we seek to meet the need. Often the new poise is not found until long after the original disturbance. Thus states of strain can arise which last for years. ’

The child comes into the world as a comparatively simple arrangement. Few things affect him, comparatively speaking, and his responses also are few and simple. But he very quickly becomes more complicated. His recurrent needs for food and for various attentions are constantly setting all his needles swinging. Little by little separate needs become departmentalized, as it were, sub-systems are formed ; hunger causes one set of responses, the sight of his toys another, loud noises yet another, and so on. But the sub-systems never become quite independent. So he grows up, becoming susceptible to

ever more numerous and more delicate influences, and as he grows, so his World grows with him.

He becomes more discriminating in some respects, he is thrown out of equilibrium by slighter differences in his situation. In other respects he becomes more stable. From time to time, through growth, fresh interests develop ; sex is the outstanding example. His needs increase, he becomes capable of being upset by quite new causes, he becomes responsive to quite new aspects of the situation.

This development takes a very indirect course. It would be still more erratic if society did not mould and remould him at every stage, reorganizing him incompletely two or three times over before he grows up. He reaches maturity in the form of a vast assemblage of major and minor interests, partly a chaos, partly a system, with some tracts of his personality fully developed and free to respond, others tangled and jammed in all kinds of accidental ways. 'It is this incredibly complex assemblage of interests to which the printed poem has to appeal. Sometimes the poem is itself the influence which disturbs us, sometimes it is merely a

means by which already existing disturbances can right themselves. More usually perhaps it is both at once.⁹

We must picture then the stream of the poetic experience as the swinging back into equilibrium of these disturbed interests. We are reading the poem in the first place only because we are in some way interested in doing so, only because some interest is attempting, directly or indirectly, to regain its poise thereby. And whatever happens as we read happens only for a similar reason. We understand the words (the intellectual branch of the stream goes on its way successfully) only because interests are reacting through that means. Our interpretation of the poem is the movement in these interests. All the rest of the experience is equally but more evidently our adaptation working itself out.

⁶ The rest of the experience is made up of emotions and attitudes. Emotions are what the reaction, with its reverberation in bodily changes, feels like. Attitudes¹ are the impulses towards one kind of

¹ For a further discussion of attitudes see the author's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Chapter XV (International Library of Psychology).

behaviour or another which are set ready by the response.' They are, as it were, its outward going part, though they may go no further than a provisional setting for occasions which never arise. Sometimes, as here in *Westminster Bridge*, they are very easily overlooked. But consider a simpler case—a fit of laughter which it is absolutely essential to conceal, in Church or during a solemn interview, for example. You contrive not to laugh; but there is no doubt about the activity of the impulses in their restricted form. The much more subtle and elaborate impulses which a poem excites are not different in principle. They do not show themselves as a rule, they do not come out into the open, largely because they are so complex. When they have adjusted themselves to one another and become organized into a coherent whole, the needs concerned may be satisfied. 'In a fully developed man a state of readiness for action will take the place of action when the full appropriate situation for action is not present. An essential peculiarity of poetry as of all the arts is that the full appropriate situation is *not* present.' It is an *actor* we are seeing upon

the stage, not Hamlet. So readiness for action takes the place of actual behaviour.

This is the main plan then of the experience. Signs on the retina, taken up by sets of needs (remember how many other impressions all day long remain entirely *unnoticed* because no interest responds to them) thence an elaborate agitation and reorganization, one branch of which is *thoughts* of what the words mean, the other an emotional response leading to the development of *attitudes*, preparations, that is, for actions which may or may not take place; the two branches being in intimate connection.

But though these attitudes may not, and usually will not, find direct outlets, recognizable as appropriate to them, this is not to say that they do not incessantly control all our intercourse with the world. When they are supposed not to do so, we have 'art for art's sake' and a 'barren aestheticism.'

We must look now a little more closely at these connections. 'It may seem odd that we do not more definitely make the thoughts the rulers and causes of the rest of the response. To do just this has been in fact the grand error of traditional

psychology. ' Man prefers to stress the features which distinguish him from monkey, and chief among these are his intellectual capacities. Important though they are, he has given them a rank to which they are not entitled. ' Intellect is an adjunct to the interests, a means by which they adjust themselves more successfully. And though his intellect is what is distinctive in man, he is not primarily an intelligence; he is a system of interests. Intelligence helps man but does not run him. '

Partly through this natural mistake, and partly because intellectual operations are so much easier to study, the traditional analysis of the working of the mind has been turned upside down. It is largely as a remedy from the difficulties which this mistake involves that poetry may have so much importance in the future. But let us look again more closely at the poetic experience.

In the first place, why is it essential in reading poetry to give the words their full imagined sound and body? What is meant by saying that the poet works with this sound and body? ' The answer is that even before the words have been intellectually

understood and the thoughts they occasion formed and followed, the movement and sound of the words is playing deeply and intimately upon the interests? How this happens is a matter which has yet to be successfully investigated, but that it happens no sensitive reader of poetry doubts. A good deal of poetry and even some great poetry exists (*e.g.*, some of Shakespeare's Songs and, in a different way, much of the best of Swinburne) in which the sense of the words can be *almost* entirely missed or neglected without loss. Never, perhaps, entirely without effort, however; though sometimes with advantage. 'But the plain fact that the relative importance of grasping the sense of the words may vary (compare Browning's *Before* with his *After*) is enough for our purpose here.'

'In nearly all poetry the sound and feel of the words, what is often called the *form* of the poem in opposition to its *content*, get to work first, and the senses in which the words are later more explicitly taken are subtly influenced by this fact. Most words are ambiguous as regards their plain sense, especially in poetry. We can take them as we please in a variety of senses.

The senses we are pleased to choose are those which most suit the impulses already stirring and giving form to the verse. Thus the form often seems an inexplicable premonition of a meaning which we have not yet grasped.⁵ The same thing can be noticed in conversation. Not the strict logical sense of what is said, but the tone of voice and the occasion are the primary factors by which we interpret. Science, it is worth noting, endeavours with increasing success to bar out these factors. We believe a scientist because he can substantiate his remarks, not because he is eloquent or forcible in his enunciation. In fact, we distrust him when he seems⁶ to be influencing us by his manner.

⁶ In its use of words most poetry is the reverse of science. Very definite thoughts do occur, but not because the words are so chosen as logically to bar out all possibilities but one. They are not; but the manner, the tone of voice, the cadence and the rhythm play upon our interests and make them pick out from among an indefinite number of possibilities the precise particular thoughts which they need.⁷ This is why poetical descriptions often seem so much more accurate than prose

descriptions. Language logically and scientifically used cannot describe a landscape or a face. To do so it would need a prodigious apparatus of names for shades and nuances, for precise particular qualities. These names do not exist, so other means have to be used. The poet, even when, like Ruskin or De Quincey, he writes in prose, makes the reader pick out the precise particular senses required from an indefinite number of possible senses which a word, phrase or sentence may carry. The means by which he does this are many and varied. Some of them have been mentioned above, but the way in which he uses them is the poet's own secret, something which cannot be taught.

‘He knows how to do it, but he does not himself necessarily know how it is done.’

Misunderstanding and under-estimation of poetry is mainly due to over-insistence on the thought in separation from the rest.

‘We can see still more clearly that thought is not the prime factor if we consider for a moment not the experience of the reader but that of the poet.’ Why does the poet use these words and no others? Not because they stand for a series of thoughts

which in themselves are what he is concerned to communicate. 'It is never what a poem says which matters, but what it is.' The poet is not writing as a scientist. He uses these words because the interests whose movement is the growth of the poem combine to bring them, just in this form, into his consciousness as a means of ordering, controlling and consolidating the uttered experience of which they are themselves a main part. The experience itself, the tide of impulses sweeping through the mind, is the source and the sanction of the words. They represent this experience itself, not any set of perceptions or reflections, though often to a reader who approaches the poem wrongly they will seem to be only a series of remarks about other things. But to a suitable reader the words—if they actually spring from experience and are not due to verbal habits, to the desire to be effective, to factitious excogitation, to imitation, to irrelevant contrivances, or to any other of the failings which prevent most people from writing poetry—the words will reproduce in his mind a similar play of interests putting him for the while into a similar situation and leading to the same response.

created, simple and eternal soul was the pivotal point, Good was conformity with the will of the Creator, Evil was rebellion. When the associationist psychologists substituted a swarm of sensations and images for the soul, Good became pleasure and Evil became pain, and so on. A long chapter of the history of opinions has still to be written tracing these changes. When the mind is taken to be an organic hierarchy of interests, what will be the difference between Good and Evil ?

For this account it will be the difference between free and wasteful organization, between fullness and narrowness of life. For if the mind is a system of interests, and if an experience is their movement, the worth of any experience is a matter of the degree to which the mind, through this movement, proceeds towards a wider equilibrium.

This is a first approximation. It needs qualifying and expanding if it is to become a satisfactory theory. Let us see how some of these amendments would run.

‘ Consider an hour of any person’s life. It holds out innumerable possibilities. Which of these are realized depends upon two main groups of factors :—the external

situation in which he is and has been living, his surroundings, including the other people with whom he is in contact; and, secondly, his psychological make-up. The first of these, the external situation, may be given too much importance, though not in politics.⁹ Biologists have recently been reminding us that organism and environment are not independent terms and we have only to notice what very different experiences different people undergo when in closely similar situations to agree. A situation which is dullness itself for one may be full of excitement for another. ⁶What an individual responds to is not the whole situation but a selection from it, and as a rule few people make the same selection.⁹ What is selected, and thus the relevant environment, is decided by the organization of the individual's interests.

Now let us simplify the case by supposing that nothing which happens during this hour is going to have any further consequences either in our hypothetical person's life or in anyone else's. He is going to cease to exist when the clock strikes—but for our purposes he must be imagined not to know this—and no one is to be a whit

the better or worse whatever he thinks, feels or does during the hour. What shall we say it would be best for him, if he could, to do ?

We need not bother to imagine the detail of the external situation or the character of the man. We can answer our question in general terms without doing so. The man has a certain definite instinctive and acquired make-up—the result of his past history, including his heredity. There will be many things which he cannot do which another man could, and many things which he cannot do in this situation, whatever it is, which he could do in other situations. ‘But given this particular man in this particular situation, our question is, which of the possibilities open to him would be better than which others ? How would we, as friendly observers, like to see him living ?’

Setting pain aside, we may perhaps agree that torpor would be the worst choice. Complete inertness, lifelessness, would be the sorriest spectacle—anticipating too nearly and unnecessarily what is to happen when the hour strikes. We can then perhaps agree, though here more resistance from preconceived ideas

may be encountered,⁶ that the best choice would be the opposite of torpor, that is to say, the fullest, keenest, most active and completest kind of life.⁹

⁶ Such a life is one which brings into play as many as possible of the *positive* interests. We can leave out the *negative* interests.⁹ It would be a pity for our friend to be frightened or disgusted even for a minute of his precious hour.

But this is not all. It is not enough that many interests should be stirred. There is a more important point to be noted.

The Gods approve
The depth and not the tumult of the soul.

⁶ The interests must come into play and remain in play with as little conflict among themselves as possible. In other words, the experience must be organized so as to give all the impulses of which it is composed the greatest possible degree of freedom.¹ 9

⁶ It is in this respect that people differ most from one another. It is this which separates the good life from the bad. Far more life is wasted through muddled

¹ See *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, by C. K. Ogden, James Wood and the author, pp. 74ff. for a description of such experience.

mental organization than through lack of opportunity. Conflicts between different impulses when they are not a necessary mode of the rectification of the mind, are, as the alienist knows, the greatest evils which afflict mankind. 9

The best life then which we can wish for our friend will be one in which as much as possible of himself is engaged. And this with as little conflict, as little frustrating interference between different sub-systems of his activities as there can be. The more he lives and the less he thwarts himself the better. That briefly is our answer as outside observers abstractly describing the state of affairs. And if it is asked, what does such life feel like, how is it to live through? the answer is that it feels like and is the experience of poetry.

‘ There are two ways in which conflict can be avoided or overcome. By conquest and by conciliation. One or other of the contesting impulses can be suppressed, or they can come to a mutual arrangement, they can adjust themselves to one another.’ We owe to psycho-analysis enough evidence as to the extreme difficulty of suppressing any

vigorous impulse. When it seems to be suppressed it is often found to be really as active as ever, but in some other form, generally a troublesome one. Persistent mental imbalances are the source of nearly all our troubles. 'For this reason, as well as for the simpler reason that suppression is wasteful of life, conciliation is always to be preferred to conquest.' People who are always winning victories over themselves might equally well be described as always enslaving themselves. Their lives become unnecessarily narrow.

'Unfortunately, most of us, left to ourselves, have no option but to go in for extensive attempts at self-conquest. It is our only means of escape from chaos.' Our impulses must have some order, some organization, or we do not live ten minutes without disaster. In the past, Tradition, a kind of Treaty of Versailles assigning frontiers and spheres of influence to the different interests, and based chiefly upon conquest, ordered our lives in a moderately satisfactory manner. But Tradition is weakening. Moral authorities are not as well backed by beliefs as they were; their sanctions are declining in force. We are in need of something to take the place

of the old order. Not in need of a new balance of power, a new arrangement of conquests, but of a League of Nations for the moral ordering of the impulses; a new order based on conciliation, not on attempted suppression.

‘Only the rarest individuals hitherto have achieved such an order, and never without disorganization of the ordinary social life.’ We may think of Blake. But many have achieved it for a brief while, for particular phases of experience, and many have recorded it for these phases.

‘Of these records poetry consists.’

But before going on to this new point let us return for a moment to our hypothetical friend who is enjoying his last hour, and suppose this limitation removed. Instead of such an hour let us consider any hour, one which has consequences for his future and for other people. Let us consider any piece of any life. How far is our argument affected? Will our standards of good and evil be altered?

Clearly the case now is, in certain respects, different; it is much more complicated. We have to take these consequences into account. We have to regard his experience not in itself alone,

but as a piece of his life and as a factor in other people's situations. We have to recognize that man is a social being, that only by a dehumanizing fiction do we regard him as an individual, and thus that moral questions put in such terms contain a contradiction. ⁶If we are to approve of the experience, it must not only be full of life and free from conflict, but it must be likely to lead to other experiences, both his own and those of other people, also full of life and free from conflict. And often, in actual fact, it has to be less full of life and more restricted than it might be in order to protect such futures. A momentary individual good has often to be sacrificed for the sake of a later or a general good.⁷ Conflicts are often necessary in order that they should not occur later. The mutual adjustment of conflicting impulses may take time, and an acute struggle may be the only way in which they can learn to co-operate peacefully in the future, and transform themselves into a more integrated way of life.

But all these complications and qualifications do not disturb the conclusion we arrived at through considering the simpler case. ⁶A good experience is still one full of

life, in the sense explained, or derivatively one conducive to experiences full of life. An evil experience is one which is self-thwarting or conducive to stultifying conflicts. So far then, all is sound and shipshape in the argument, and we can go on to consider the poet. 9

IV.

THE COMMAND OF LIFE

Eyes, ears, tongue, nostrils bring
News of revolt, inadequate counsel to
An infirm king.

W. H. AUDEN, *Paid on Both Sides*.

‘The chief characteristic of poets is their amazing *command* of words. This is not a mere matter of vocabulary, though it is significant that Shakespeare’s vocabulary is the richest and most varied that any English poet has ever used. It is not the quantity of words a writer has at his disposal, but the way in which he disposes them that gives him his rank as a poet. His sense of how they modify one another, how their separate effects in the mind combine, how they fit into the whole response, is what matters.’ As a rule the poet is not conscious of the reasons why just these words and no others best serve.’ They fall into their place without his conscious control, and a feeling of rightness, of inevitability, is commonly his sole conscious ground for his certainty that he has ordered them aright. It would as a

rule be idle to ask him why he used a particular rhythm or a particular epithet. He might give reasons, but they would probably be mere rationalizations having nothing to do with the matter. 'For the choice of the rhythm or the epithet was not an intellectual, that is, an analysable, matter (though it may be capable of an intellectual justification), but was a movement of interest seeking to confirm itself, or to order itself with its fellows.'

It is very important to realize how deep are the motives which govern the poet's use of words. No study of other poets which is not an impassioned study will help him. He can learn much from other poets, but only by letting them influence him deeply, not by any superficial examination of their 'style.' For the motives which shape a poem spring from the root of the mind. 'The poet's style is the direct outcome of the way in which his interests are organized. That amazing capacity of his for ordering speech is only a part of a more amazing capacity for ordering his experience.'

This is the explanation of the fact that poetry cannot be written by cunning and study, by craft and contrivance. To a

superficial glance the productions of the mere scholar, steeped in the poetry of the past and animated by intense emulation and a passionate desire to place himself among the poets, will often look extraordinarily like poetry. His words may seem as subtly and delicately ordered as words can be, his epithets as happy, his transitions as daring, his simplicity as perfect. By every intellectual test he may succeed. 'But unless the ordering of the words sprang, not from knowledge of the technique of poetry added to a desire to write some, but from an actual supreme ordering of *experience*, a closer approach to his work will betray it.' Characteristically its rhythm will give it away. For rhythm is no matter of tricks with syllables, but directly reflects personality. It is not separable from the words to which it belongs. Moving rhythm in poetry arises only from genuinely stirred impulses, and is a more subtle index than any other to the order of the interests.

'Poetry, in other words, cannot be imitated; it cannot be faked so as to baffle the only test that ought ever to be applied. It is unfortunately true that this

test is often very difficult to apply. And to be sure that the test has been applied is always hazardous. 'For the test is this—that only genuine poetry will give to the reader who approaches it in the proper manner a response which is as passionate, noble and serene as the experience of the poet, the master of speech, because in the creative moment he is the master of experience itself,' 'Passionate,' 'noble,' 'serene' preserve themselves from misuse no better than other words; we can rely upon none of them and even less upon any other *criterion* of the omniform self-completing motions of the mind. If it is so, it will prove itself—but not necessarily to us or at once. And apart from this, it is easy to read carelessly and shallowly, and easy to mistake for the response something which does not properly belong to it at all. By careless reading we miss what is in the poem. And in some states of mind—for example, when intoxicated—the silliest doggerel may seem sublime. What happened was not due to the doggerel but to the drink.

With these general considerations in mind we may turn now from the question

—What can the dawning science of psychology tell us about poetry?—to the allied questions—How is science in general, and the new outlook upon the world which it induces, already affecting poetry, and to what extent may science make obsolete the poetry of the past? To answer these questions we need to sketch some of the changes which have recently come about in our world-picture, and to consider anew what it is that we demand from poetry.

V.

THE NEUTRALIZATION OF NATURE

All those large dreams by which men long live
well

Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell ;

This then is real, I have implied,

A painted, small, transparent slide.

WILLIAM EMPSON.

Poetry is failing us, or we it, if after our reading we do not find ourselves changed; not with a temporary change, such as luncheon or slumber will produce, from which we inevitably work back to the *status quo ante*, but with a permanent alteration of our possibilities as responsive individuals in good or bad adjustment to an all but overwhelming concourse of stimulations. How much contemporary poetry has the power to make such deep changes? Let us set aside youthful enthusiasms; there is a time in most lives when, rightly enough, Mr. Masfield, Mr. Kipling, Mr. Drinkwater, or even Mr. Noyes or Mr. Studdert Kennedy may profoundly affect the awakening mind; it is being introduced to poetry, or rather to

the possibility¹ of emotional experience instigated, if not wholly controlled, through ordered words. Later on, looking back, we can see that any one of a hundred other poets would have served as well. Let us consider only the experienced reader, shaped by and responsive to a wide variety of the pressures from the contemporary situation, and familiar also with many different modes of the poetry of the past.

Contemporary poetry which will, accidents apart, modify the attitudes of this reader will be such as would not have been written in another age than our own. It will have sprung in part from the contemporary situation. It will be the outgrowth of needs, impulses, attitudes, which did not arise in the same form for poets in the past. And correspondingly—though this we are less willing to acknowledge—the poetry of the past will be read by such a reader in new ways.² ‘The eye altering alters all.’ A poem no more than any other object is independent of the interests by which it is apprehended. ‘Our attitudes to man, to nature, and to the

¹ See the admirable and important *Note on the development of taste in poetry* at the end of Chapter I of Mr. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry*.

universe which contains them both, change with every generation, and have changed more extensively and more deeply in recent years. 'We cannot leave these changes out of account in speculating about modern poetry, though, of course, arguments from them are no valid ground for appraisal.' 'When attitudes are changing neither criticism nor poetry remain stationary.' 'To those who realize what the poet is this will be obvious; all literary history bears it out.'

It would be of little use to give a list of the chief recent intellectual revolutions and to attempt to deduce therefrom what must be happening to poetry. The effects upon our attitudes of changes of opinion are too complex to be calculated so. 'What we have to consider is not men's current opinions but their attitudes—how they feel about this or that as part of the world; what relative importance its different aspects have for them; what they are prepared to sacrifice for what; what they trust, what they are frightened by, what they desire. To discover these things we must go to the poets. Unless they are failing us, they will show us just these things.'

‘ They will *show* them, but, of course, they will not state them.’ Their poetry will not be *about* their attitudes in the sense in which a treatise on anatomy is about the structure of the body. It arises out of attitudes and will evoke them in an adequate reader, but, as a rule, it will not mention any. And when it does they may be entering dramatically only as means. We must, of course, expect occasional essays in verse upon psychological topics, but these should not mislead us. Most of the attitudes with which poetry is concerned are indescribable for reasons suggested in Section Two above—and can only be named or spoken about indirectly through the situations (typically poems) which evoke them. The poem, the actual experience as it forms itself in the mind of the fit reader, controlling his responses to the world and ordering his impulses, does not ordinarily speak about its purposes. It has no need to while it can effect them. ‘Poetry is thus our best evidence as to how other men feel about things; and as we read it, we discover not so much how life seems to another, as how it is for ourselves.’³

Although we cannot describe attitudes in terms which do not apply also to others which we are not considering, and although we cannot deduce a poet's attitudes from the general intellectual background, none the less, after reading his poetry, when his experience has induced our own, we can sometimes profitably look round us to see why these attitudes should be so very different, in some ways, from those we find in the poetry of 100 or of 1,000 years ago. In so doing we gain a means of indicating what these attitudes are, useful both for those who are constitutionally unable to read poetry (an increasing number), and for those victims of education who neglect modern poetry because they "don't know what to make of it."

What, then, has been happening to the intellectual background, to the world-picture, and in what ways may changes here have caused a reorganization of our attitudes?

⁶ The central dominant change may be described as the *Neutralization of Nature*,¹ the transference from the *Magical View* of the world to the scientific;⁹ a change so great that it is perhaps only paralleled

¹ See Appendix.

historically by the change, from whatever adumbration of a world-picture preceded the Magical View, to the Magical View itself. 'By the Magical View I mean, roughly, the belief in a world of Spirits and Powers which control events, and which can be evoked and, to some extent, controlled themselves by human practices. The belief in Inspiration and the beliefs underlying Ritual are representative parts of this view. It has been decaying slowly for some 300 years, but its definite overthrow has taken place only in the last 70.' Vestiges and survivals of it prompt and direct a great part of our daily affairs, but it is no longer the world-picture which an informed mind most easily accepts.

'There is some evidence that Poetry, together with the other Arts, arose with this Magical View. It is a possibility to be seriously considered that Poetry may pass away with it.'

'The reasons for the downfall of the Magical View are familiar. It seems to have arisen as a consequence of an increase in man's knowledge of and command over nature (the discovery of agriculture). It fell through the extension of that knowledge of and command over nature.'

Throughout its (10,000 years?) reign its stability has been due to its capacity for satisfying men's emotional needs through its adequacy as an object for their attitudes. We must remember that human attitudes have developed always *inside* the social group; they are what a man feels, the mainsprings of his behaviour towards his fellow-men, and their application to the inhuman is an extension by metaphor. 'Thus the Magical View, being an interpretation of nature in terms of man's own most intimate and most important affairs, suits man's emotional make-up better than any other view possibly can.' The attraction of the Magical View lay very little in the actual command over nature which it gave. That Galton was the first person to test the efficacy of prayer experimentally is an indication of this. What did give the Magical View its standing was the ease and adequacy with which the universe therein presented could be emotionally handled, the scope offered for man's love and hatred, for his terror as well as for his hope and his despair. It gave life a shape, a sharpness, and a coherence

that no other means could so easily secure.

In its place we have the universe of the mathematician, a field for the tracing out of ever wider and more general uniformities. 'A field in which intellectual certainty is available, on an unlimited scale.' Also the despondencies, the emotional excitements accompanying research and discovery, again on an unprecedented scale. Thus a number of men who might in other times have been poets may to-day be in bio-chemical laboratories—a fact of which we might avail ourselves, did we feel the need, in defence of an alleged present poverty in poetry. But apart from these thrills, what has the world-picture of science to do with human emotions? A god voluntarily or involuntarily subject to the General Theory of Relativity does not make an emotional appeal. So this form of compromise fails. Various emergent deities have been suggested—by Mr. Wells, by Professors Alexander and Lloyd Morgan—but, alas ! the reasons for suggesting them have become too clear and conscious. They are there to meet a demand, not to make one; they do not do the work for which they were invented.

The revolution brought about by science is, in short, too drastic to be met by any such half-measures. It touches the central principle by which the Mind has been deliberately organized in the past, and no alteration in beliefs,¹ however great, will restore equilibrium while that principle is retained. I come now to the main purport of these remarks.

‘Ever since man first grew self-conscious and reflective he has supposed that his feelings, his attitudes, and his conduct spring from his knowledge.’ That as far as he could it would be wise for him to organize himself in this way, with knowledge² as the foundation on which should rest feeling, attitude, and behaviour. In point of fact, he never has been so organized, knowledge having been until recently too scarce; but he has constantly been persuaded that he was built on this plan, and has endeavoured to carry the structure further on these lines. He has

¹ See Appendix.

² *I.e.* thoughts which are both true and evidenced, in the narrower stricter senses. For a discussion of some relevant senses of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ see *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Chapters XXXIII and XXXIV, and *Mencius on the Mind*, Chapter IV, also *The Meaning of Meaning*, Chapters VII and X.

sought for knowledge, supposing that it would itself *directly* excite a right orientation to existence, supposing that, if he only knew what the world was like, this knowledge in itself would show him how to feel towards it, what attitudes to adopt, and with what aims to live. He has constantly called what he found in this quest, 'knowledge,' unaware that it was hardly ever pure, unaware that his feelings, attitudes, and behaviour were *already* orientated by his physiological and social needs, and were themselves, for the most part, the sources of whatever it was that he supposed himself to be knowing.

‘Suddenly, not long ago, he began to get genuine knowledge on a large scale—knowledge, that is to say, purified from the influences of his wishes or his fears.’ The process went faster and faster; it snowballed. ‘Now he has to face the fact that the edifices of supposed knowledge, with which he so long buttressed and supported his attitudes, will no longer stand up, and, at the same time, he has to recognise that pure knowledge is irrelevant to his aims, that it has no *direct* bearing upon what he should feel, or what he should attempt to do.’

For science, as our most elaborate way of *pointing* to things systematically, tells us and can tell us nothing about the nature of things in any *ultimate* sense. It can never answer any question of the form : *What* is so and so ? it can only tell us *how* such and such behave. And it does not attempt to do more than this. Nor, indeed, can more than this be done. Those ancient, deeply troubling, formulations that begin with 'What' and 'Why'—as contrasted with 'How'—prove, when we examine them, to be not questions at all; but requests—for emotional satisfaction. * They indicate our desire not for knowledge, the indifferent and emotionally neutral knowledge which is yielded by science, but for assurance¹, a point which appears clearly when we look into the 'How' of questions and requests, of knowledge and desire. Science can tell us about man's place in the universe and his chances; that the place is precarious, and the chances problematical. It can enormously increase our chances if we can make wise use of it.

¹ On this point the study of the child's questions included in *The Language and Thought of the Child* by J. Piaget (Kegan Paul, 1926), is illuminating.

But it cannot tell us what we are or what this world is; not because these are insoluble questions, but because they are not scientific questions at all. Science cannot answer these pseudo-questions; they do not belong to its province. Nor can philosophy or religion 'answer' them in the sense in which science has taught us to expect answers to its questions. As the senses of 'question' shift so do those of 'answer,' and those of 'fact,' 'truth,' 'belief,' and 'knowledge' with them. The new prestige and power of science which are due to its separation from confusion with other modes of inquiry are shifting these senses and forcing a more general awareness of their differences upon us. And, with that, all the varied 'answers' which have for ages been regarded as the keys of wisdom are, *for many minds, in danger of dissolving together.*

The result is a biological crisis which is not likely to be decided without trouble. It is one which we can, perhaps, decide for ourselves, partly by thinking, partly by reorganizing our minds in other ways; otherwise it may be decided for us, not in the way we should choose. While it

lasts it puts a strain on each individual and upon society, which is part of the explanation of many modern difficulties, the difficulties of the poet in particular, to come back to our present subject. I have not really been far away.

VI.

POETRY AND BELIEFS

Control of the passes was, he saw, the Key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced with the old tricks.

W. H. AUDEN.

‘The business of the poet, as we have seen, is to give order and coherence, and so freedom, to a body of experience.’ To do so through words which act as its skeleton, as a structure by which the impulses which make up the experience are adjusted to one another and act together. The means by which words do this are many and varied. To work them out is a problem for linguistic psychology, that embarrassed young heir to philosophy. What little can be done shows already that most critical dogmas of the past are either false or nonsense. A little knowledge is not here a danger, but clears the air in a remarkable way.

Roughly and inadequately, even in the dim light of present knowledge,⁶ we can say that words work in the poem in two

main fashions. As sensory stimuli and as (in the *widest* sense) symbols. We must refrain from considering the sensory side of the poem, remarking only that it is *not* in the least independent of the other side, and that it has for definite reasons prior importance in most poetry. We must confine ourselves to the other function of words in the poem, or rather, omitting much that is of secondary relevance, to one form of that function, let me call it *pseudo-statement*.⁹

It will be admitted—by those who distinguish between scientific statement, where truth is ultimately a matter of verification as this is understood in the laboratory, and emotive utterance, where ‘truth’ is primarily acceptability by some attitude, and more remotely is the acceptability of this attitude itself—that it is not the poet’s business to make scientific statements. Yet poetry has constantly the air of making statements, and important ones; which is one reason why some mathematicians cannot read it. They find the alleged statements to be false.⁹ It will be agreed that their approach to poetry and their expectations from it are mistaken. But what exactly is the

other, the right, the poetic, approach and how does it differ from the mathematical?

‘The poetic approach evidently limits the framework of possible consequences into which the pseudo-statement is taken. For the scientific approach this framework is unlimited. Any and every consequence is relevant. If any of the consequences of a statement conflicts with acknowledged fact then so much the worse for the statement. Not so with the pseudo-statement when poetically approached. The problem is—just how does the limitation work? One tempting account is in terms of a supposed universe of discourse, a world of make-believe, of imagination, of recognized fictions common to the poet and his readers. A pseudo-statement which fits into this system of assumptions would be regarded as ‘poetically true’; one which does not, as ‘poetically false.’ This attempt to treat ‘poetic truth’ on the model of general ‘coherence theories’ is very natural for certain schools of logicians but is inadequate, on the wrong lines from the outset. To mention two objections, out of many; there is no means of discovering what the ‘universe of discourse’

is on any occasion, and the kind of coherence which must hold within it, supposing it to be discoverable, is not an affair of logical relations. Attempt to define the system of propositions into which

" O Rose, thou art sick ! "

must fit, and the logical relations which must hold between them if it is to be ' poetically true ' ; the absurdity of the theory becomes evident.

* We must look further. In the poetic approach the relevant consequences are not logical or to be arrived at by a partial relaxation of logic. Except occasionally and by accident logic does not enter at all. They are the consequences which arise through our emotional organization.* The acceptance which a pseudo-statement receives is entirely governed by its effects upon our feelings and attitudes. Logic only comes in, if at all, in subordination, as a servant to our emotional response. It is an unruly servant, however, as poets and readers are constantly discovering. A pseudo-statement is ' true ' if it suits and serves some attitude or links together attitudes which on other grounds are desirable. This kind of ' truth ' is so opposed to scientific ' truth ' that it is a

pity to use so similar a word, but at present it is difficult to avoid the malpractice.¹

This brief analysis may be sufficient to indicate the fundamental disparity and opposition between pseudo-statements as they occur in poetry and statements as they occur in science. 'A pseudo-statement is a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes' (due regard being had for the better or worse organizations of these *inter se*); a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, *i.e.*, its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points.

Statements true and false alike do, of course, constantly touch off attitudes and action. Our daily practical existence is largely guided by them. On the whole true statements are of more service to us than false ones. 'None the less we do not and, at present, cannot order our emotions and attitudes by true statements alone.'

¹ A pseudo-statement, as I use the term, is not necessarily false in any sense. It is merely a form of words whose scientific truth or falsity is irrelevant to the purpose in hand.

'Logic' in this paragraph is, of course, being used in a limited and conventional, or popular, sense.

Nor is there any probability that we ever shall contrive to do so.⁹ This is one of the great new dangers to which civilization is exposed. Countless pseudo-statements—about God, about the universe, about human nature, the relations of mind to mind, about the soul, its rank and destiny—pseudo-statements which are pivotal points in the organization of the mind, vital to its well-being, have suddenly become, for sincere, honest and informed minds, impossible to believe as for centuries they have been believed.¹ The accustomed incidences of the modes of believing are changed irrecoverably; and the knowledge which has displaced them

¹ See Appendix. For the mind I am considering here the question "Do I believe x ?" is no longer the same. Not only the 'What' that is to be believed but the 'How' of the believing has changed—through the segregation of science and its clarification of the techniques of proof. This is the danger; and the remedy suggested is a further differentiation of the 'Hows.' To these differences correspond differences in the senses of 'is so' and 'being' where, as is commonly the case, 'is so' and 'being' assert believings. As we admit this, the world that 'is' divides into worlds incommensurable in respect of so called 'degrees of reality.' Yet, and this is all-important, these worlds have an order, with regard to one another, which is the order of the mind; and interference between them imperils sanity.

is not of a kind upon which an equally fine organization of the mind can be based.

This is the contemporary situation.

‘The remedy, since there is no prospect of our gaining adequate knowledge, and since indeed it is fairly clear that scientific knowledge cannot meet this need, is to cut our pseudo-statements free from that kind of belief which is appropriate to verified statements.’ So released they will be changed, of course, but they can still be the main instruments by which we order our attitudes to one another and to the world. ‘This is not a desperate remedy, for, as poetry conclusively shows, even the most important among our attitudes can be aroused and maintained without any believing of a factual or verifiable order entering in at all. We need no such beliefs, and indeed we must have none, if we are to read *King Lear*. Pseudo-statements to which we attach no belief and statements proper, such as science provides, cannot conflict. It is only when we introduce inappropriate kinds of believing into poetry that danger arises.’ To do so is from this point of view a profanation of poetry.

Yet an important branch of criticism which has attracted the best talents from prehistoric times until to-day consists of the endeavour to persuade men that the functions of science and poetry are identical, or that the one is a 'higher form' of the other, or that they conflict and we must choose between them.

The root of this persistent endeavour has still to be mentioned; it is the same as that from which the Magical View of the world arose. If we give to a pseudo-statement the kind of unqualified acceptance which belongs by right only to certified scientific statements—and those judgments of the routine of perception and action from which science derives—, if we can contrive to do this, the impulses and attitudes with which we respond to it gain a notable stability and vigour. Briefly, if we can contrive to believe poetry, then the world *seems*, while we do so, to be transfigured. It used to be comparatively easy to do this, and the habit has become well established. With the extension of science and the neutralization of nature it has become difficult as well as dangerous. Yet it is still alluring; it has many analogies with drug-taking.⁹ Hence

the endeavours of the critics referred to. Various subterfuges have been devised along the lines of regarding Poetic Truth as figurative, symbolic; or as more immediate, as a truth of Intuition transcending common knowledge; or as a higher form of the same truth that science yields. ‘Such attempts to use poetry as a denial or as a corrective of science are very common. One point can be made against them all: they are never worked out in detail.’ There is no equivalent of Mill’s *Logic* expounding any of them. The language in which they are framed is usually a blend of obsolete psychology and emotive exclamations.

The long-established and much-encouraged habit of giving to emotive utterances—whether pseudo-statements simple, or looser and larger wholes taken as saying something figuratively—the kind of assent which we give to unescapable facts, has for most people debilitated a wide range of their responses. A few scientists, caught young and brought up in the laboratory, are free from it; but then, as a rule, they pay no *serious* attention to poetry. For most men the recognition of the neutrality of nature brings about—

through this habit—a divorce from poetry. They are so used to having their responses propped up by beliefs, however vague, that when these shadowy supports are removed they are no longer able to respond. Their attitudes to so many things have been forced in the past, over-encouraged. And when the world-picture ceases to assist there is a collapse. Over whole tracts of natural emotional response we are to-day like a bed of dahlias whose sticks have been removed. And this effect of the neutralization of nature is perhaps only in its beginnings. However, human nature has a prodigious resilience. Love poetry seems able to out-play psycho-analysis.

A sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed, are the signs in consciousness of this necessary reorganization of our lives.¹ Our

¹ My debt to *The Waste Land* here will be evident. The original footnote seems to have puzzled Mr. Eliot and some other readers. Well it might! In saying, though, that he 'had effected a complete severance between his poetry and all beliefs' I was referring not to the poet's

attitudes and impulses are being compelled to become self-supporting; they are being driven back upon their biological justification, made once again sufficient to themselves. And the only impulses which seem strong enough to continue unflagging are commonly so crude that, to more finely developed individuals, they hardly seem worth having. Such people cannot live by warmth, food, fighting, drink, and sex alone. Those who are least affected by the change are those who are emotionally least removed from the animals. As we shall see at the close of

own history, but to the technical detachment of the poetry. And the way in which he then seemed to me to have 'realized what might otherwise have remained a speculative possibility' was by finding a new order through the contemplation and exhibition of disorder.

'Yes! Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—*nicht wahr?* . . . No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me how to be? In the destructive element immerse . . . that was the way." *Lord Jim*, p 216. Mr. Eliot's later verse has sometimes shown still less 'dread of the unknown depths' That, at least, seems in part to explain to me why *Ash Wednesday* is better poetry than even the best sections of *The Waste Land*.

this essay, even a considerable poet may attempt to find relief by a reversion to primitive mentality.

It is important to diagnose the disease correctly and to put the blame in the right quarter. 'Usually it is some alleged 'materialism' of science which is denounced. This mistake is due partly to clumsy thinking, but chiefly to relics of the Magical View.'¹ For even if the Universe were 'spiritual' all through (whatever that assertion might mean, all such assertions are probably nonsense), that would not make it any more accordant to human attitudes. 'It is not what the universe is made of but how it works, the law it follows, which makes verifiable knowledge of it incapable of spurring on our emotional responses, and further, the nature of knowledge itself makes it inadequate. The contact with things which we therein establish is too sketchy and indirect to help us. We are beginning to know too much about the bond which unites the mind to its object in knowledge.'¹

¹ Verifiable scientific knowledge of course. Shift the sense of 'knowledge' to include hope and desire and fear as well as reference, and what I am saying would no longer be true. But then the relevant sense of 'true' would have changed too. Its sanction would no longer be verifiability.

for that old dream of a perfect knowledge which would guarantee perfect life to retain its sanction. What was thought to be pure knowledge, we see now to have been shot through with hope and desire, with fear and wonder ; and these intrusive elements indeed gave it all its power to support our lives. In knowledge, in the ' How ? ' of events, we can find hints by which to take advantage of circumstances in our favour and avoid mischances. But we cannot get from it a *raison d'être* or a justification of more than a relatively lowly kind of life.

The justification, or the reverse, of any attitude lies, not in the object, but in itself, in its serviceableness to the whole personality. Upon its place in the whole system of attitudes, which is the personality, all its worth depends. This is as true for the subtle, finely compounded attitudes of the civilized individual as for the simpler attitudes of the child.

• In brief, the imaginative life is its own justification ; and this fact must be faced, although sometimes—by a lover, for example—it may be very difficult to accept. When it is faced, it is apparent that all the attitudes to other human beings and to the

world in all its aspects, which have been serviceable to humanity, remain as they were, as valuable as ever. Hesitation felt in admitting this is a measure of the strength of the evil habit I have been describing. But many of these attitudes, valuable as ever, are, now that they are being set free, more difficult to maintain, because we still hunger after a basis in belief.

VII. SOME MODERN POETS

. . . spitting from the mouth the withered
apple-seed.

T. S. ELIOT, *Ash Wednesday*.

It is time to turn to those poets through study of whose work these reflections arose. ⁶ Hardy is for every reason the poet with whom it is most natural to begin. Not only did his work span the whole period in which what I have called the neutralization of nature was finally effected, but it definitely reflected that change throughout. ⁷ Short essays in verse are fairly frequent among his *Collected Poems*, essays almost always dealing with this very topic; but these, however suggestive, are not the ground for singling him out as the poet who has most fully and courageously accepted the contemporary background; nor are the poems which are most definitely *about* the neutrality of nature the ground for the assertion. There is an opportunity for a misunderstanding at this point. The ground is the tone, the handling and the

rhythm of poems which treat other subjects, for example, *The Self Unseeing*, *The Voice*, *A Broken Appointment*, and pre-eminently *After a Journey*. A poem does not necessarily accept a situation because it gives it explicit recognition, but only through the precise mutation of the attitudes of which it is composed. Mr. Middleton Murry, against some of whose positions parts of this essay may be suspected by the reader to be aimed, has best pointed out, in his *Aspects of Literature*, how peculiarly "adequate to what we know and have suffered" Hardy's poetry is. "His reaction to an episode has behind it and within it a reaction to the universe." This is not as I should put it were I making a statement; but read as a pseudo-statement, emotively, it is excellent; it makes us remember how we felt. Actually, it describes just what Hardy, at his best, does not do. * He makes no reaction to the universe as an object for contemplation, recognizing it as something to which no reaction is more relevant than another.† Mr. Murry is again well inspired, this time both emotively and scientifically, when he says: "Mr. Hardy stands high above all other modern poets

by the deliberate purity of his responsiveness. The contagion of the world's slow stain has not touched him; from the first he held aloof from the general conspiracy to forget in which not only those who are professional optimists take a part." These extracts (from a writer more agonizingly aware than others that some strange change has befallen man in this generation, though his diagnosis is, I believe, mistaken) indicate very well Hardy's place and rank in English poetry. "He is the poet who has most steadily refused to be comforted in an age in which the temptation to seek comfort has been greatest. The comfort of forgetfulness, the comfort of beliefs, he has put both these away. Hence his singular preoccupation with death; because it is in the contemplation of death that the necessity for human attitudes to become self-supporting, in the face of an indifferent universe, is felt most poignantly. Only the greatest tragic poets have achieved an equally self-reliant and inimitable acceptance."

From Hardy to Mr. De la Mare may seem a large transition, though readers of Mr. De la Mare's later work will agree that there are interesting resemblances—in

Who's That and in other poems in *The Veil* where Mr. De la Mare is notably less himself than when writing at his best. In his best poetry, in *The Pigs and the Charcoal Burner*, in *John Mouldy*, no intimation of the contemporary situation sounds.⁶ He is writing of, and from, a world which knows nothing of these difficulties, a world of pure phantasy for which the distinction between knowledge and feeling has not yet dawned.⁷ When in other poems, more reflective, in *The Tryst*, for example, Mr. De la Mare does seem to be directly facing the indifference of the universe towards "poor mortal longingness," a curious thing happens. His utterance, in spite of his words, becomes not at all a recognition of this indifference, but voices instead an impulse to turn away, to forget it, to seek shelter in the warmth of his own familiar thickets of dream, not to stay out in the wind. His rhythm, that indescribable personal note which clings to all his best poetry, is a lulling rhythm, an anodyne, an opiate, it gives sleep and visions, phantasmagoria;⁸ but it does not give *vision*, it does not awaken. Even when he most appears to be contemplating the fate of the modern, "whom

the words of the wise have made dumb," the drift of his verse is still " seeking after that sweet golden clime " where the mental traveller's journey *begins*. ' 9

There is one exception to this charge (for in a sense it is an adverse criticism, though not one to be pressed except against a great poet), there is one poem in which there is no such reluctance to bear the blast—*The Mad Prince's Song* in *Peacock Pie*. But here the spirit of the poem, the impulse which gives it life, comes from a poet who more than most refused to take shelter; *The Mad Prince's Song* derives from *Hamlet*.

Mr. Yeats and D. H. Lawrence present two further ways of dodging those difficulties which come from being born into this generation rather than into some earlier age. ' Mr. De la Mare takes shelter in the dream-world of the child, Mr. Yeats retired, for a season, into black velvet curtains and the visions of the Hermetist, and Lawrence made a magnificent attempt to reconstruct in himself the mentality of the Bushman. There are other modes of escape open to the poet. Mr. Blunden, to name one other poet only, goes into the country, but few people follow him

there in his spirit, whereas Mr. Yeats and Lawrence, whether they are widely read or not, do represent tendencies among the defeated which are only too easily observable. ⁵

Mr. Yeats' work from the beginning was a repudiation of the most active contemporary interests. But at first the poet of *The Wanderings of Usheen*, *The Stolen Child*, and *Innisfree* turned away from contemporary civilization in favour of a world which he knew perfectly, the world of folk-lore as it is accepted, neither with belief nor disbelief, by the peasant. ⁶ Folk-lore and the Irish landscape, its winds, woods, waters, islets, and seagulls, and for a while an unusually simple and direct kind of love poetry in which he became more than a minor poet, these were his refuge. ⁷ Later, after a drawn battle with the drama, he made a more violent repudiation, not merely of current civilization but of life itself, in favour of a supernatural world. ⁸ But the world of the 'eternal moods,' of supernal essences and immortal beings was not, like the Irish peasant stories and the Irish landscape, part of his natural and familiar experience.

He turned to a world of symbolic phantasmagoria about which he was desperately uncertain.⁹ The uncertainty came in part from the adoption, as a technique of inspiration, of the use of trance, of dissociated phases of consciousness. The revelations given in these dissociated states are insufficiently connected with normal experience. This, in part, explains the weakness of Mr. Yeats' transcendental poetry. A deliberate reversal of the natural relations of thought and feeling may be the rest of the explanation. Mr. Yeats took certain feelings—feelings of conviction attaching to certain visions—as evidence for the thoughts which he supposed his visions to symbolize.⁴ To Mr. Yeats the value of *The Phases of the Moon* lay not in any attitudes which it arouses or embodies but in the doctrine which for an initiate it promulgates.⁵

⁴ The resort to trance, and the effort to discover a new world-picture to replace that given by science are the two most significant points for our purpose in Mr. Yeats' work.¹ A third might be the

¹ Who could have foreseen before *The Tower* Mr. Yeats' development into the greatest poet of our age or the miracles in *Songs for Music Perhaps*?

singularly bitter contempt for the generality of mankind which occasionally appears.⁶

The doctrinal problem arises again, but in a clearer form with Lawrence. But here we have the advantage of an elaborate prose exposition, *Phantasia of the Unconscious*, of the positions which so many of the poems advocate. It is not unfair to put the matter in this way, since there is little doubt possible that the bulk of Lawrence's published verse is prose, scientific prose too, jottings, in fact, from a psychologist's notebook, with a commentary interspersed. Due allowance being made for the extreme psychological interest of these observations, there remains the task of explaining how the poet who wrote the *Ballad of Another Ophelia* and *Aware*, some pages of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, and *The White Peacock*, should have wandered, through his own zeal misdirected, so far from the paths which once appeared to be his alone to open.

⁶ Lawrence's revolt against civilization seems to have been originally spontaneous, an emotional revulsion free from *ad hoc* beliefs. It sprang directly from experience. He came to abhor all the

attitudes men adopt, not through the direct prompting of their instincts, but because of the supposed nature of the objects to which they are directed. The conventions, the idealizations, which come between man and man and between man and woman, which often queer the pitch for the natural responses, seemed to him the source of all evil. Part of his revolt was certainly justified. These idealizations—representative examples are the dogma of the equality of man and the doctrine that Love is primarily sympathy—are beliefs illicitly interpolated in order to support and strengthen attitudes in the manner discussed at length above. And Lawrence's original rejection of a morality not self-supporting but based upon beliefs, makes his work an admirable illustration of my main thesis. But two simple and avoidable mistakes deprived his revolt of the greater part of its value. He overlooked the fact that such beliefs commonly arise because the attitudes they support are already existent. He assumed that a bad basis for an attitude meant a bad attitude. In general, it does mean a forced attitude, but that is another matter. Secondly, he tried to

cure the disease by introducing other beliefs of his own manufacture in place of the conventional beliefs and in support of very different attitudes. 9

6 The genesis of these beliefs is extremely interesting as an illustration of primitive mentality. Since the attitudes on which he fell back are those of a very early stage of human development, it is not surprising that the means by which he supported them should be of the same era, or that the world-picture which he worked out should be similar to that described in *The Golden Bough*. The mental process at work is schematically as follows: First, undergo an intense emotion, located with unusual definiteness in the body, which can be described as "a feeling *as though* the solar plexus were connected by a current of dark passional energy with another person." Those whose emotions tend to be localized will be familiar with such feelings. The second step is to say "I must trust my feelings." The third is to call the feeling an intuition. The last is to say "*I know* that my solar plexus is, etc." 9 By this means we arrive at indubitable knowledge that the sun's energy is recruited from the life on the

earth and that the astronomers are wrong in what they say about the moon, and so on.

‘ The illicit steps in the argument are not quite so evident as they appear to be in this analysis. To distinguish an intuition *of* an emotion from an intuition *by* it is not always easy, nor is a description of an emotion always in practice distinguishable from an emotion. Certainly we must trust our feelings—in the sense of acting upon them. We have nothing else to trust. And to confuse this trusting with believing an emotive description of them is a mistake which all traditional codes of morality encourage us to commit.’

The significance of such similar disasters in the work of poets so unlike and yet so greatly gifted as Mr. Yeats and Lawrence is noteworthy. For each, the traditional *scaffolding of conventional beliefs* proved unsatisfying, unworkable as a basis for their attitudes. Each sought, in very different directions it is true, a new set of beliefs as a remedy. For neither did the world-picture of science seem a possible substitute. And neither seems to have envisaged the possibility of a poetry which is independent of all such supporting

beliefs,¹ probably because, however much they differ, both are very serious poets.' A great deal of poetry can, of course, be written for which total independence of all beliefs is an easy matter. ⁶ But it is never poetry of the more important kind, because the temptation to introduce beliefs is a sign and measure of the importance of the attitudes involved. At present it is not primarily religious beliefs, in stricter and narrower senses of the word, which are most likely to be concerned.⁷ Emphases alter surprisingly. University societies founded twenty-five years ago, for example, to discuss religion, were discussing sex when this was first written, as they are discussing political ideologies to-day.

⁶ Yet the necessity for independence is increasing. This is not to say that traditional poetry, into which beliefs readily enter, is becoming obsolete; it is merely becoming more and more difficult to approach without confusion; it demands a greater imaginative effort, a greater purity in the reader.⁹

We must distinguish here, however.

¹ Mr. Yeats' later triumphs, especially the *Cracked Mary* (or *Crazy Jane*) songs, seem to me to be such a poetry.

‘There are many feelings and attitudes which, though in the past supported by beliefs now untenable, can survive their removal because they have other, more natural, supports and spring directly from the necessities of existence. To the extent to which they have been undistorted by the beliefs which have gathered round them they will remain as before. But there are other attitudes which are very largely the product of belief and have no other support. These will lapse if the changes here forecasted continue. With their disappearance some forms of poetry—much minor devotional verse, for example—will become obsolete. And with the unravelling of the intellect *versus* emotion entanglement, there will be cases where even literature to which immense value has been assigned—the speculative portions of the work of Dostoevsky may be instanced—will lose much of its interest, except for the history of the mind.’ It was because he belonged to our age that Dostoevsky had to wrestle so terribly in these toils. A poet to-day, whose integrity is equal to that of the greater poets of the past, is inevitably plagued

by the problem of thought and feeling¹ as poets have never been plagued before.

A pioneer in modern research upon the origins of culture was asked recently whether his work had any bearing upon religion. He replied that it had, but that at present he was engaged merely in 'getting the guns into position.' The same answer might be given with regard to the probable consequences of recent progress in psychology, not only for religion but for the whole fabric of our traditional beliefs about ourselves. In many quarters there is a tendency to suppose that the series of attacks upon received ideas which began, shall we say, with Galileo and rose to a climax with Darwinism, has overreached itself with Einstein and Eddington, and that the battle is now due to die down. This view seems to be too optimistic. The most dangerous of the sciences is only now beginning to come into action. I am thinking not so much of Psycho-analysis or of Behaviourism as of the whole subject which includes them.

¹ Of verifiability and faith, I would say, if it were clear that the faith was never in anything that could possibly be verified or, conversely, that the verification was of a kind that had no relevance to the faith.

The Hindenburg Line to which the defence of our traditions retired as the result of the onslaughts of the last century may still be officially held (in the schools, for example), but it is really abandoned as worth neither defence nor attack. The struggle is elsewhere, and it is no longer over matters suited to intellectual debate. 'What to believe?'—which could be argued—has given place to 'With what different kinds of believings must we order the different ranks of our myths¹?' and that is decided not by arguing but in living. The lowest rank and the least challengeable or optional or dispensable—that routine of perception which guards the safety of our every bodily step, that order of expectations or of assumptions in virtue of which we catch or miss our trains—has unequalled authority over its own members. It lends this authority to the sciences which derive from it—though not, of course, to their optional, speculative aspects. And these sciences progressively invade every province of our thought. They meet nothing with equal

¹ Not necessarily a derogatory word; see *Coleridge on Imagination*, Chapter VII.

authority, or that can resist them, which does not take its power from the same source in verifiable happenings.

In so far as any question comes within their peculiar authority they decide it; and a peculiar believing or acceptance there belongs. Challenge from myths of other ranks is suicidal. They challenge by mistake as to their own rank (which would, if they kept it, be higher, as concerned with more inclusive interests) and thus degrade the kinds of believing they embody.⁶ The danger is that science, as it has more to tell us about ourselves, may more and more invite this mistake and so provoke other myths to defy it and then force them to surrender. But their work is not that of science; as they do not give us what science gives, so science cannot give us what they give.⁷

If a conflict which should never have arisen extends much further, a moral chaos such as man has never experienced may be expected.⁸ Our protection, as Matthew Arnold, in my epigraph, insisted, is in poetry. It is capable of saving us, or, since some have found a scandal in this word, of preserving us or rescuing us from confusion and frustration. The

poetic function is the source, and the tradition of poetry is the guardian, of the supra-scientific myths. "The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility." So wrote the best poet of my generation recently.¹ That we should consider further what this power is, what it has given us, and what threatens it, is all my argument. ♪

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, p.15

APPENDIX

Two chief words seem likely occasions of misunderstanding in the above; and they have in fact misled some readers. One is *Nature*, the other is *Belief*.

Nature is evidently as variable a word as can be used. Its senses range from the mere inclusive THAT, in which we live and of which we are a part, to whatever would correspond to the most detailed and interconnected account we could attain of this. Or we omit ourselves (and other minds) and make Nature *either* what influences us (in which case we should not forget our metabolism), *or* an object we apprehend (in which case there are as many Natures as there are types of apprehension we care to distinguish). And what is 'natural' to one culture is strange and artificial to another. (See *Mencius on the Mind*, chap. III.) More deceptively, the view here being inseparable from the eye, and this being a matter of habitual speculation, we may talk, as we think, the same language and yet put very different things

into Nature; and what we then find will not be unconnected with what we have put in.

I have attempted some further discussion of these questions in Chapters VI and VII of *Coleridge on Imagination*.

Belief. Two 'beliefs' may differ from one another: (1) In their objects (2) In their statements or expressions (3) In their modes (4) In their grounds (5) In their occasions (6) In their connections with other 'beliefs' (7) In their links with possible action (8) And in other ways. Our chief evidence usually for the beliefs of other people (and often for our own) must be some statement or other expression. But very different beliefs may fittingly receive the same expression. Most words used in stating any speculative opinion are as ambiguous as 'Belief'; and yet by such words belief-objects must be distinguished.

But in the case of 'belief' there is an additional difficulty. Neither it nor its partial synonyms suggest the great variety of the attitudes (3) that are commonly covered (and confused) by the term. They are often treated as though they were

mere variations in degree. Of what? Of belief, it would be said. But this is no better than the parallel trick of treating all varieties of love as a mere more or less only further differentiated by their objects. Such crude over-simplifications distort the structure of the mind and, although favourite suasive devices with some well-intentioned preachers, are disastrous.

There is an ample field here awaiting a type of dispassionate inquiry which it has seldom received. A world threatened with ever more and more leisure should not be too impatient of important and exploratory subtleties.

Meanwhile, as with 'Nature,' misunderstandings should neither provoke nor surprise. I should not be much less at my reader's mercy if I were to add notes doubling the length of this little book. On so vast a matter, even the largest book could contain no more than a sketch of how things have seemed to be sometimes to the writer.

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